

Managing the Paper Load

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At the 1998 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago, at the end of a late-afternoon session on responding to student writing, a middle-aged woman in a print dress stood up to ask a question. I had seen her at two or three other sessions on response, but she made no comments and asked no questions. Now she leaned forward, gripped the chair top in front of her, and looked straight into the eyes of the panelists. "I have been to sessions all day on this topic. I've heard one idea after another about what I can try and what I should be doing when I respond to student writing. It all makes sense. It all sounds very good. But . . . I teach four classes a semester. A hundred and fifteen students. I spend my nights and weekends marking student papers. Everything I've heard up to now will take even more time. I am overwhelmed. Exhausted. What I came here to find out, what I want to know – and what nobody is telling me – is: How can I do it in *less*?"

A hard question. Really no question at all, but a request, a complaint — a plea. She has come looking for relief, a way out. What can a teacher do just to keep up with what she has to do when she has such a course load, when she has so many students, when week in and week out she has so many papers to deal with? How could she do the kinds of things she was being asked to do with response? What would I do if I had 100 students a semester, most of them in writing classes?

I want to tell her that she can put these contemporary principles of response into practice in no more time than she now takes in responding to her students' writing. She can deal more fully with the student's content, look at the writing in terms of its larger contexts, write out her comments in full statements, elaborate on her key comments, and write comments that are constructive, taking no more than 15 or 20 minutes a paper. I want to encourage her, to tell her that our response to student writing is the most important thing we do in a writing course, the activity that has the greatest potential to make a difference in the ways students write and look at themselves as learning writers. There are no time-savers. There are no ways to cut corners and do a good job. I want to hold out a belief that whatever time we do spend reading and responding to student writing is time well spent-and will show itself, in time, in student writing. And yet, and yet, I know I am asking a lot, maybe asking too much. Quick counterclaims will not work. Pep talks will not do. She is standing there ringing the top of the chair, and she is feeling overwhelmed. *What can I do?*

Still, when I get the chance to respond, I go with my first thoughts. I remember trying to concede, on the one hand, that the principles of response she had been hearing about would probably take more time, not less, and trying, on the other, to convince her that they could be put into practice in no more time than she was now spending. I remember suggesting that it wasn't a matter of simply cutting back; it was a matter of making good use of whatever time we did spend, could spend, responding.

Now I'd like to take another shot at the issue and offer some practical suggestions for how we might make comments that are detailed, substantive, and constructive but won't require more time than we usually have to give to response-and, if they are taken up imaginatively, might even take less time, at least some of the time. First I'll offer advice for approaching response strategically across the semester. Then I'll offer advice for approaching response to individual papers. Finally, I'll offer specific strategies for commenting fully and efficiently on individual papers.

Planning Comments Across the Course

Let me begin with two basic principles, which, when ignored, lead to a lot of purposeless commentary and a lot of wasted time, for teachers and students alike, and then go on from there.

1. You don't have to respond, much less respond fully, to all assignments. Not all writing assignments need to be graded, marked up, or even read in order to be valuable, and not every paper that we read needs to be commented on – or commented on extensively. Some writing requires only a quick read-through and a nod here and there. Some only a well-placed question or two, a couple acknowledgments, or a few reader responses. Some can be read by peers in class. Some writing doesn't have to be read at all: its value can lie in the fact that it has been composed, and in being composed has helped compose the writer. It all depends on what you're trying to accomplish with the assignment.
2. You don't have to provide equal time or make the same type of response for every student or every paper. Not all papers merit the same depth of response. Some papers and some students require more response, some less. It is not only okay but beneficial to give only as much response as the individual paper merits or the individual student needs or can make use of productively.
3. So get creative with your assignments and be selective about which assignments you read more (or less) fully, and what issues you deal with (and don't deal with, or don't yet deal with) in your comments. The more assignments, the more room you have to be selective with the comments you do make. You can free yourself from having to address a range of concerns on every paper, across every page. You can focus on only certain concerns at certain times. Instead of reading every writing from top to bottom, for content, arrangement, style, and correctness, decide ahead of time on one or two key concerns for the writing and write comments only on those areas.
4. Establish a sequence of concerns you will emphasize in your reading and responding across the semester. What will you be most concerned with on the first paper? On the second and third papers? On the papers that come in at the end of the course? Address only certain concerns at certain times in the course. A good principle is to deal extensively with the content and thought of students' writing in the first half of the course and hold off on doing more with sentence structure and correctness until the second half. Decide whether you will address certain concerns on every paper or whether you will read papers according to criteria that develop incrementally across the term. Let students know what you are and are not addressing at a given

time, in your assignments, in your classwork, and in your responses. Then set your priorities and stick to them.

5. Decide where in the course you will provide detailed sets of comments and where you will provide only brief commentary. For instance, respond only briefly in the first two or three weeks, and save your most elaborate responses for the early-middle segment of the course. As the semester progresses and you've built a foundation for your work, place more and more responsibility on students to respond to one another's writing and maybe even help grade completed essays. Use more inclusive comments only in the second half of the course, or better yet, only at the end of the semester. Also, do more and more self-evaluation as the course goes on. Any writing class that is going to have more than a minimal effect must help students become independent learners.

Planning Comments Before Each Set of Papers

6. Before you begin reading – or, better yet, after you've glanced through the stack of papers – get set in your mind what your main concerns will be on this set of papers. The more you know what you are looking for, the better your response and the more efficient your work will be.

7. Decide which modes of commentary you will be most inclined to use—and why. Are you going to emphasize praise and open questions, to give students a sense of what you are looking for in their writing but keep them firmly in charge of their own writing? Are you going to look mainly to play back the text in interpretive and reader-response comments? Or, in an effort to provide more direction, are you going to look to point out problems and direct the writer to make certain revisions?

8. To cut back dramatically on the time you give to response, divide the stack of papers in half. Read half of the students' papers more fully this time, the other half more fully next time, according to the criteria established for the paper. Or skim through the stack of papers quickly and place them in two stacks—papers that you'll respond to in detail this time, papers that you'll respond to only in brief. Or have students indicate whether they would like full or minimal comments on a given paper. Why spend time making a full set of comments on a paper that the student acknowledges is not ready for such full response? Keep a record, and try to respond more fully to those students on the next assignment.

Responding to Individual Papers

9. Read through the paper once quickly without stopping to make any comments; as you go, somehow identify (with plusses and minuses, dashes, checks, or penciled in words) the concerns you'll take up in your response and select the key instances where these problems occur. This double reading might seem at first to take more time, but it doesn't. In fact, it may save time in the long run. The time you put in on a preliminary reading will help you get a sense of and sort through the papers to come, decide what you'll focus on in your comments, and make the time you spend responding more directed and purposeful.

10. Limit the scope of your responses. Focus on two or three priorities and give students certain things to work on at certain times. Put other matters on hold – they aren't going anywhere. If it's a rough draft, concentrate especially, say, on content, focus, and purpose. Deal only briefly, perhaps in a general comment or two at the end, if at all, with matters of wording, sentence structure, and correctness. If it's one of many papers to come in during the semester, just deal with its content or voice. If it's a draft that's already gone through a revision or two and needs now to be polished up and readied for readers, devote yourself to commenting on sentence-level matters. This is the time to address problems with wordiness and punctuation. Save full-length marginal and end comments for papers that are going to be revised – or papers that are ripe for instruction. When you're about to hand the papers back, let students know what you have – and haven't-dealt with.

11. Instead of dealing with every instance of every concern you take up in a paper, concentrate on only two or three places where these issues arise. Leave the rest for students to work with on their own.

12. If you address fewer issues, you can deal more fully with the comments you do make. Play back your reading of the text, offer some evaluation or advice, and then follow up on the comment with an explanation or some helpful questions. By making fewer comments but writing them out more fully, you can help students better understand the comments and use them more effectively to improve their writing and develop their practical understanding as writers. In doing so, you will make better use of the time you spend and earn better dividends for your efforts.

13. Get creative with your marginal comments. On selected assignments, focus on one or two concerns in the margins and write fewer but fuller comments. Several well-developed marginal comments will take less time than a full end note, yet they can go far toward directing the student to specific issues and leading her back into the writing. Save the end comment for presenting a larger perspective on the writing. On other assignments, make only marginal comments and no end note at all. Commenting in the margins requires less contextualizing than end notes and can be done more quickly. Make the marginal comments on a couple areas only, so you won't have to use an end comment to clarify points or indicate priorities. Such comments are especially useful when you are highlighting certain areas of writing in class or after you've made fuller comments on earlier papers or on earlier drafts. This earlier work will prepare students for the kinds of comments you make.

14. Get creative with your end notes. Don't fall into the habit of always responding in detail in the margins and then providing a full overview in your closing comment. On selected assignments, provide only a brief end note to the student and deal only with one or two concerns (for this assignment, for this point in the class, for this paper, or for this student). This method is especially useful on papers that have a considerable problem with one key issue of writing that gets in the way of any other successes, say, a draft that leaves its key points undeveloped, a draft that has a lot of material but is poorly arranged, or a paper that is well-developed and effectively arranged but needs work on sentence structure. When you focus your end note on only one or two areas of writing, you can then do a little bit more with each of these areas, making whatever comments you do make clearer and more useful. Never mind about covering the remaining territory. Or just make a quick general statement about one of these other concerns and leave it at

that. There will be time for these matters, if not on this paper, then on the next paper; if not this semester, next semester. Make a habit of doing whatever you do well rather than always trying to address all there is to address. Less is more.

15. If you limit your comments to one or two areas and still want to give the student more information about other areas of the writing, use a grid or scoring guide, indicating with a quick check or number how the student has done along a two-point scale (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) or three-point scale (exceptional/good/fair).

16. Use minimal marking to indicate (but not necessarily correct or even explain) errors. Instead of circling, correcting, and explaining the student's mistakes, just place a dash or a tick mark (no need to write any words) in the margin next to the lines in which the errors occur. Leave it to the student to find and correct. Moreover, instead of minimally marking all errors, minimally mark only one or two selected types of errors: say, comma splices and commas or misspellings and usage problems. To make up for not explaining the problems in your comments, plan a short workshop on one or two of the most frequent problems for the class as a whole. Copy and hand out samples of the error taken from the papers. Discuss the problem and illustrate it through several samples. Have students go through the rest of the handout and make corrections and then, when you hand back their papers, have them go through their writing, find any places where they have made such errors, and correct them.

17. Extend the use of minimal marking to indicate selected sentence-level problems that students can address on their own, either with the help of a handbook or, better yet, in-class workshops that acquaint them with the problem and give them practice at making improvements.

18. Make use, selectively, of other abbreviations and symbols. On selected papers, mark-without necessarily putting any words on the page-ideas or passages you like, ideas that you'd like to hear more about, places where you had trouble understanding the writing or had questions, sentences that were sharp or fuzzy. Peter Elbow uses straight underlines to indicate passages he likes and wavy underlines to indicate difficult passages. Glynda Hull sometimes asterisks samples of a given problem across a student's text and holds off on commenting on them until her end note. I like to draw a box around key terms or statements that are left undefined or undeveloped, a backward-pointing arrow to note places where I see the student going back over his earlier writing to give it substance, and brackets to indicate passages that the student might consider deleting. If you're doing intensive work with voice, say, or the beginning and ends of sentences, use an abbreviation to call attention to these concerns. The key to using such abbreviations and symbols is to keep them limited to a couple of concerns and make sure students know what they are meant to signify. Using more than a few symbols or abbreviations is asking for trouble. the less your comments engage and communicate with students, the more the time you've spent responding is wasted.

I can't assure beleaguered teachers that these strategies will enable them to significantly reduce the time they now spend responding to student writing. The fact is that substantive, constructive teacher response is going to take time. But I believe these strategies can be employed without

spending any more time than they now spend with response, and I promise that they'll make whatever time they do spend more worthwhile.